

Off the Gangsta Tip: A Rap Appreciation, or Forgetting about Los Angeles

Tim Brennan

1. *Rap Criticism up to Now*

Already mature, rap criticism has had some memorable moments: David Toop's *Rap Attack*, for example—a book linking rap to an immense variety of diasporic genres but above all to the Bronx griots of the Melle Mel era (c. 1978–79); or Greg Tate's not always approving assessments in the *Village Voice* and in *Vibe*.¹ No longer exactly new, there are at least ten full-length books, with more on the way, and numerous essays, which have appeared in places like *Artforum*, *New Literary History*, and the *New Yorker*. Rap criticism, however, still roams in the landscapes of the pointed generalization, pacing around an urgent core of personalities and moods it either elicits without discussing, or discusses without feeling.²

Above all, I want to thank Jonathan Scott for his help and support on this essay, and for years of back-and-forth. He will write the definitive book on “East Coast” someday. To Michael Sprinker, Eric Lott, and Robin D. G. Kelley goes my gratitude for tough and invaluable readings that included some sharp and informative disagreements. I also want to thank Ericson Perkins and Matt Shore who (with Johnny Brennan) sent me my first Grand Master Flash tape. They kept me through the years in fabulous supply.

1. See David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (London, 1984), and Greg Tate, “The Sound and the Fury,” *Vibe* 1 (Fall 1993): 15; hereafter abbreviated “SF.” Toop's book has now been expanded and updated as *Rap Attack Two: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (London, 1991).

2. See Ann Marlowe, “Rap Hermeneutics,” *Artforum* 30 (Mar. 1992): 14–16; Richard Shusterman, “The Fine Art of Rap,” *New Literary History* 22 (Summer 1991): 613–32, hereafter abbreviated “FAR”; and Susan Orlean, “The Master of Mix,” *New Yorker*, 15 Nov. 1993, pp. 60–67. In addition to the books cited in the notes below, see also Steven Hager, *Hip*

The cultural commentary now focused on Madonna, romance novels, computer hackers, and rock still dwarfs that on rap, although one could well argue that only Madonna comes close to matching hip-hop's shaping of an emergent international style.³ Rap criticism deserves more. For Madonna is now gone, and the inviting fieldwork of computer culture is much less easy to define and far more restricted to the upper incomes than people suppose in the face of predictions of a personal computer in every home. Rap on the other hand, far from being swept aside, has been explained in the mode of two extremes: either in the tremulous tones of the *Rolling Stone* down stylist or in the throat-clearing, business-like language of the well-wishers out to interpret the wild, the unruly, and the immature.⁴ Moving from one pole to the other takes one across a scene of musical detail that so far has not been expressed very well.

By *expression* I am referring not to a style but a type of information. In spite of an impressive range of rap writing, very little yet captures the joy of the thing: digging Yo Yo on earphones in a traffic jam, hearing EPMD at level ten in the morning before orange juice, or blaring Das EFX at dinnertime while sitting on the fire escape smoking. Apart from the blurbs of the trade journals and an occasional puff piece in the alternative press, very little of the writing gets at the simple pleasures of listening. To take one of dozens of exceptions, Robert Marriott's "Temples of Boom" is an essay on the group Cypress Hill that speaks of "the silent ones riding by in the Sidekick thumping that Wu-Tang joint instrumental, the bass emanations bumpin' from their trunk."⁵ This writing certainly *is* about the joys of listening, but it is also primarily atmosphere. I

Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti (New York, 1984); *Rap: The Lyrics*, ed. Lawrence A. Stanley (New York, 1992); and Janette Beckman, *Rap: Portraits and Lyrics of a Generation of Black Rockers* (New York, 1991).

3. See, for example, Francesco Adinolfi, *Suoni dal ghetto: La musica dalla strada alle hit-parade* (Genova, 1989).

4. Notable exceptions are now in evidence. Although stuck in the West Coast gangsta narrative, Touré's feature article "Snoop Dogg's Gentle Hip-Hop Growl" (*New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1993, p. H32) is usefully pedagogical: "beneath the posturing and booming beat lies one of pop's most complex forms." The article's limitations, however, are exactly what I focus on below—for example, the implication that "posturing" and a "booming beat" somehow give the public the wrong impression of what makes the music good.

5. Robert Marriott, "Temples of Boom," *Village Voice*, 12 Oct. 1993, p. 67.

Tim Brennan is an assistant professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, teaching in the English department and the Program in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. He is the author of *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (1989) and is currently at work on *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism and the Death of the Native* (forthcoming).

am talking rather about the absence of outreach whose principle would be the creation of an informed listener. There are very few of them in the rap debate.

What if one claimed that the pleasures of rap—like the colors of Da Vinci and the polyphonies of Bach—had to be learned, deliberately, as in the art appreciation courses? Or that those who could not, at least by projection, understand such pleasures were in some basic sense uneducated? The obstacles to this training deserve study. For even supposed allies in the multicultural crusade have a zero threshold of tolerance when it comes to hip-hop. The distinction here, then, would not be between the high and the low but between the sophisticated attention now widely given popular cultures and the more coldly literal attentions widely given rap. It is not difficult to find intellectuals who value dub, country western, acid, or reggae but who find rap repetitive, childish, and ugly. How can one get to the tactical point of insisting on rap's formal expertise when the very sense of it as art is so weak—a perception shored up by the recent stampede among black professionals to encircle it and kill it off?⁶ For the perceptual blockage here, I will argue, has not only to do with class but with that other dissonance known as the generational conflict. Thus, J-Smooth's ironic proviso at the start of each episode of his hip-hop program "The Underground Railroad" on WBAI-FM in New York warns those offended by "youth cultures, black and otherwise" to turn off their radios.⁷

Before getting to these matters of detail, we have to see better where we are. At rare moments in the rap commentary, one finds the proper critical tone, and it is only fair to begin by quoting one:

Basically we decided we were into rap because, even media hype aside, this music had some kind of hard edge to it. . . . Think back. These last have been fiscal years in which Madonna's 'back on top,' . . . in which Rod Stewart's out of cryogenics and back on top; . . . Bobby McFerrin makes a platinum mint and then several commercial jingles out of a burred synth-reggae invitation to "Be Happy," a song that has the same verbal prepackaging feel as 'Where's the Beef?' and 'You Look Mahv'lus' and other linguistic equivalents of the Pet Rock. . . . Rap appears in the famished late 80s as potentially a genuine musical Scene . . . something loud and upsetting . . . and

6. These words were written shortly after the announcement by Harlem-based radio station WBSL that it would now refuse to play rap with violent or offensive lyrics, a decision ratified by KBLX San Francisco/Berkeley, KSIL San Antonio, and WLIB New York. The decision was loudly supported in press conferences by local and national community leaders such as the Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. Rap is, however, a volatile topic, and by the time these words appear in print, the situation may well have changed.

7. J-Smooth, *Underground Railroad*, WBAI-FM New York, 99.5, Tuesdays 10:00–11:00 P.M.

best, an identifiable set of places-in-time where large forces meet, marry, and beget.⁸

I personally share this mood. Despite errors of fact elsewhere in the book, the authors understand something about aura, and they capture in words how the music feels. Rap lacks a critical mass of fellow travelers bringing the artifact into a leisurely, detailed assessment as distinct from anxiously declaring its intent. And it continues to be a mistake to assume that many of its critics, even the interesting ones, listen to very much of it—a point made convincingly by Houston Baker, Jr.⁹ In the absence of detail, the large number of reflections on rap's larger social meanings is suspicious.

Urged by racial politics to address the form, the rap critic brings to the work what it already abundantly displays. Rap does not need doses of politicized history to contextualize it because it brings its own. What it does *not* have is precisely what the newly politicized literary canon already arrived possessing, that is, simply an appreciation. In recent years (the last two especially), rap has been fenced in, not liberated, by the familiar frames of Los Angeles, the censorship debate, and the black family. And this containment is not the work only of doughty assaults on black youth in the mainstream media. The counterassault by liberal thinkers and tuned-in journalists has led to a similar diminishing critical range. Almost every piece of recent rap writing has either made these frames (especially the L.A. uprising) their centerpiece or has belabored them—a pattern secured further by Brian Cross's recent *It's Not about a Salary . . . : Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles*, which Verso reports had more advanced sales than Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*.¹⁰ Although gangster rap is by no means an exclusively West Coast form, most rap criticism of any kind has centered overwhelmingly on West Coast artists. Part of the argument here addresses the distinctive feel and (to me, superiority) of the East Coast groups.¹¹ Leaving to the side the best of the West (WC and the Maad Circle, Yo Yo, and others), it is hard for me not to think that

8. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (New York, 1990), pp. 46–47.

9. See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 80–81.

10. See Brian Cross, *It's Not about a Salary . . . : Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (London, 1993), and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, 1990). It should be noted, though, that Cross's book was begun in 1991 before the uprising. Moreover, in his superb introduction he pays homage to East Coast leads and even concedes at one point that early on "the [L.A.] community was the same as in New York, but the cutting edge of the music seemed to have been lost, in crossing the country, to commercialism" (p. 21). The publication statistics are also a little misleading. The advanced sales for Davis's highly successful book—more than 25 percent fewer—were for a more expensive cloth edition. Cross's book is a paperback (Jackie McCarthy, promotion and publicity manager at Verso Books-New York, conversation with author, 1994).

11. Trying to pit West and East Coast traditions against one another is not my interest here. That project is out of step with the artists themselves (who avoid this clash); it is

the L.A. gangsta style of, say, Dr. Dre is to the East Coast gangsta style of Kool G. Rap what *Baywatch* is to *Law and Order*, or what Venice Beach is to the East Village: a shallow and mercenary version, the Hollywood sensationalist image replacing a grittier soul-searching.

The two most common variations of commentary have been the promo and the bromo, or social anodyne. In the commercial sphere, turnover demands that the magazine literature consist of quick bit plugging: hasty, abbreviated views of the buying audience, using terms from the worn stock of the music reviewers in the impossible task of capturing sound in impoverished verbal phrases like "hard-driving," "light," and not much more. Breezing through *Rap Pages*, *Hip Hop*, or *The Source* gives one a language, items of personal scandal in individual rap bios, and tips for what to buy. These are fanzines, places of mutual back-scratching and career-making that, apart from an occasional interview, leave those wanting a certain kind of inquiry hungry.¹² Some of the best reference books—especially Havelock Nelson and Michael Gonzalez's *Bring the Noise*, 350 pages of data on the groups, their names, origins, oeuvres—are short on analysis.¹³

By contrast, much of the rest of the literature is given over to rap politics, spiralling from airy form to spiky content. Vying for coveted space in the major newspapers and magazines, the journalistic rap critic zeroes in on L.A. or the East Coast, Houston, or Oakland gangstas. As others have pointed out, these critics are not for the most part talking about the African-American trope of the bad ass (Stackolee, ragamuffin, Superfly) but the gangbanger himself, the actual target of the police sweep, the ghetto statistic in full flesh—a playless literalism with its own history. Indeed, this elementary confusion of heterotopia with mimicry, of a fictive world lamenting violence with snapshots of a violent South Central, also lies behind the current debate over pornography and TV violence, whose literalism has been challenged by, among others, John Leonard in an excellent essay in the *Nation*.¹⁴ In some ways, like the scan-

insupportable because so much of the New York old school has moved to L. A.; and it would also seem to explain away the contributions of performers like Ice Cube, WC and the Maad Circle, or the Freestyle Fellowship as some tainted or derivative variation on a "real" hardcore. My point is to show the neglect of East Coast style because of the focus on a very partial L.A. pop scene. The extent of the partiality is illustrated wonderfully in Cross's book, which opens up to view noncommercial and emergent artists, many of them women, Chicano, Korean, and Samoan.

12. Thus, with the exception of an interview in *Essence*, and a short article in *Vibe*, I do not quote work appearing in magazines such as *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Details*, *Rap Pages*, *Rap-pin'*, *Melody Maker*, *The Source*.

13. See Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzalez, *Bring the Noise: A Guide to Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (New York, 1991).

14. See John Leonard, "TV and the Decline of Civilization," *The Nation*, 27 Dec. 1993, pp. 785, 801–4.

dal over Bigger Thomas in the 1940s, the rap debate induces a paralysis of imagination in the face of rap's "crude" mack daddy narratives.

The emphasis on the gangsta is on one level understandable. The critic is faced with making a form of music matter to readers who, by and large, do not partake of the stuff—a rather large fact lingering behind the ignorance uttered about rap by people who would never wander so recklessly into print if rap were considered a serious art (Cornel West: "rap is visionless"; Sherley Anne Williams: rap is "bare of figurative language").¹⁵

With none of these same market proddings, the academic critic has jumped into the gangsta loop. If the writing has not been directly about that obligatory reference point the L.A. riots or its spin-offs—the Ice-T "Cop Killer" scandal, Tupac Shakur's rape charges, or the decision by Harlem-based WBLS radio to suppress the violent gangsta lyric—it has been about the black family, misogyny, or, as in Baker's case, black studies in the university; that is, rap is related to matters of public concern in the sociology of race relations.¹⁶ That response too has its obvious merits. One has only to recall the newspaper columnists drawing a strict causality between rap lyrics and urban crime.¹⁷ Baker particularly did a good job of calling the bluff of the "expert witnesses," the ones who "felt no compulsion whatsoever to interrogate the complexities of the zones of the 'popular' to which they pretend expertise," even if many of these reviled witnesses were also busy defending youth against the media scourge in an act of courage and, on its own terms, clarification.¹⁸

By the late 1980s, being uninformed about hip-hop culture could not be defended on the grounds that there was no easy place for novices to learn. There were already excellent pre-L.A. uprising genealogies by Toop, Dick Hebdige, Nelson George, and others as well as a flurry of counterarticles written to address the media pillory of the "tactless" MCs.¹⁹ And yet the rappers were being called by a *New York Times* op-

15. Cornel West as quoted in Tate, "The Sound and the Fury," p. 15; Sherley Ann Williams, "Two Words on Music: Black Community," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent and Michele Wallace (Seattle, 1992), p. 165.

16. Although too excessive a focus, the politicization of rap is far from beside the point, particularly in the critiques responding to its (often-violent) misogyny. If a distinction needs to be made between an adolescent rhetoric of male sexual conquest and explicit misogyny—which seems to me on a different scale of offensiveness—both the misogyny and the sexism are real and they deserve the rebukes they have received. An interesting complication of the issue would come from examining the response to this sexism by women rappers like Yo Yo ("Hoes"), MC Lyte ("Ruffneck"), and Salt 'n' Pepa ("Let's Talk About Sex").

17. Often the beguiling form of the simple news story achieves by association what the op-ed columnist achieves by the statement of opinion. See, for example, the fallout over Tupac in James T. Jones IV, "Art or Anarchy? Gunplay Spurs Rap Debate," *USA Today*, 3 Nov. 1993, p. D1.

18. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, p. 79.

19. See Toop, *The Rap Attack*; Dick Hebdige, "Rap and Hip Hop: The New York Connection," *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music* (London, 1987), pp. 136–48; and

ed contributor "Amos 'n Andy in Nikes."²⁰ It was precisely in such an atmosphere that we found the spirited (and welcome) responses of people like Tricia Rose, although there were many others.²¹ However necessary, many of the responses' patient march through the ABC's had the unforeseen effect of drifting out of the hip-hop orbit. It certainly had to be pointed out, as these essays did, that not all rap was about pimping and ho-popping; that rap lyrics too can be ironic; that art can be compensatory, not just a simpleton's photo of what happened. But even in the books composed almost entirely of rappers speaking in their own words one could not escape the obligatory entry into the debate over "issues."²² The artists too were busy dealing with plain abuse.

It is good to remember how far, and low, that abuse went, for it helps explain why so much of the rap commentary stuck to the basic task of defending the harsh language of resistance or calming fears over the music's rage.²³ Mona Charen in the *Chicago Tribune* had sneered, for example, about 2 Live Crew's ungrammatical speech ("people does") and labelled the lyrics, not obscene or pornographic (technical terms), but, with a wink in the direction of Chicago's new white mayor, "barbarous."²⁴ Paul Delaney in the *New York Times* had more the air of the analyst. Explaining the behavior of "crotch-holding rap artists," he averred that "as more teen-age girls became mothers, their sons grew up hating what, in their minds, their mothers represented—'bitches' and 'ho's.' This left the boys with serious problems in dealing with women." Delaney quickly abandons psychology, however, to talk in a franker and more revealing register about rappers as "scheming, bumbling buffoons."²⁵

This conjuncture of orgiastic scandal and militant retort shows us

Nelson George, *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Postsoul Black Culture* (New York, 1992). As for the counterarticles, I mention several of them below (by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Paul Gilroy, and, above all, Robin D. G. Kelley). For views that are both highly critical of hip-hop messages and attitudes and yet wary of the media pillory, see Michele Wallace, "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music Is Rap," *New York Times*, 29 July 1990, p. B20, and Michael Eric Dyson, "As Complex as They Wanna Be: 2 Live Crew," *Z Magazine* 4 (Jan. 1991): 76–78.

20. See Paul Delaney, "Amos 'n Andy in Nikes," *New York Times*, 11 Oct. 1993, p. A17.

21. See Tricia Rose, "Black Texts/Black Contexts," in *Black Popular Culture*, pp. 223–27. See also Jeffrey Louis Decker, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism," *Social Text* 34 (Spring 1993): 53–84.

22. See *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip Hop Vision*, ed. Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady (New York, 1991).

23. As, for example, the great rap impresario Russell Simmons of Def Jam Records did recently when he said: "If the guardians of morality really cared about America's youth, they would not be fighting Tupac and Snoop Dogg's music. Instead, they'd fight against the conditions which led them to live the lives which create such music" (Quoted in Larry McShane, "Behind Rap's Love of Guns," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 28 Dec. 1993, p. A9.

24. Charen's syndicated piece appeared first as "Much More Nasty Than They Should Be," *Boston Globe*, 16 June 1990, p. 23.

25. Delaney, "Amos 'n Andy in Nikes," p. A31.

what the rap crisis is notoriously about, that is, how the social fear of black youth has been more triumphal and less guarded in the “friendly” arena of aesthetics. Take Joseph Sobran’s ingenuous phrasing in a syndicated piece from the *Milwaukee Journal*:

Rap is art for those who lack artistic taste and talent, music for those who can’t carry a tune, poetry for those who lack basic linguistic skills. . . . It is roughly to freedom of expression what S&M is to romance. . . . It consists of monotonous patter in irregular prosody set to a thumping background rhythm. . . . A lot of rap is frankly pitched to what the Victorians called the criminal classes. . . . The mission of shocking the bourgeoisie has passed from the avant-garde to the common thugs.²⁶

Hating rap had achieved its own scale. In Sobran’s reliance on the social vision of Victorian Britain, lower classes without blush can be referred to simply as criminals. And then (in an equally revealing shift to the later era of European modernism) he reserves the ability to shock for a youth whom he permits to be alienated on the grounds that they possessed an aesthetic, avant-garde vision that would lead artists productively for generations. Rap is, a priori, not permitted to have such a vision. In this mood, a writer can play to known responses with the assurance of an automatic public assent, as Bruce Willis did in the film *The Last Boy Scout* when, taunted by his torturer (“Just once I would like to hear you scream in pain”), Willis quips, “Play some rap music.”

The hysterical pitch of newspaper and television violated the usually coded forms that racism is allowed to take. Rap in this world is so manifestly vulgar, so transparently silly and vicious, that the usual limits on public censure do not apply. What we notice, then, is that this form of unguarded racism enters only through an aesthetic portal. The political fight over rap—inseparable from its signification as “black youth” in a declining economy—must be fought in an allegorically coded public debate over art and artlessness.

An analogy to another public debate over art is useful here. Relying on the socially known—which is known because it is felt—Morley Safer made press recently by marching into a museum, beholding a contemporary abstract painting, and before the cameras, devaluing it, ridiculing those who spent money on it, and suggesting that it did not belong in the venerated rooms of a publicly funded space.²⁷ Why is such a gesture rare? The aura of what must be known by all educated Americans (in E. D. Hirsch’s useful sense) protects certain elite artifacts against the puzzle-

26. Joseph Sobran, “Stodgy Detractors Are Right: Rap Is an Ugly Form of Expression,” distributed by Universal Press Syndicate, 1992. The *Milwaukee Journal* is one of many newspapers in which Sobran’s column appeared.

27. He did this in a feature story for *60 Minutes* entitled, “But Is It Art?” 19 Sept. 1993.

ment and hostility of the uninformed. People cannot gainsay Shakespeare even if (as is mostly the case) they do not enjoy his plays.

I do not think it is possible for rap to become a part of this canon. Abstract expressionist painting has become widely immune to a carping populism. It is more difficult to conceive this happening with rap, at least not without destroying its intentional abrasiveness as well as its American cityscapes of police murders and shabby poverty zones. The point, however, is that when we demand that rap be given the aura of, say, abstract expressionist painting, we learn, or expose, a great deal about art's functionalities, about internal colonialism, about the class anxieties of black intellectuals, about the untranslatability of working-class value. These are the objects of study that I am proposing here.

Even some of rap's obvious close listeners and partakers join the public affairs talk, engaging in the plodding but necessary litany of the social. Indeed, the recoveries of the social, political, and economic contexts have been invaluable, explaining as they do the multifold responses of the rap artist to the "gangster capitalism" of the American state. As an example of the postuprising genre, Robin D. G. Kelley's essay "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles" assembles its best points, enlivens them with historical illustrations, and finally supersedes them. With edifying persistence, Kelley undoes the view of the rapper as an insensitive, sociopathic lout in an extended analysis of the variable textures of gangsta content that places the form in an older genealogy of black "baadman" narratives that he traces back through Lloyd Price's "Stagger Lee" (1958) and Alan Lomax's recording of Jelly Roll Morton's vernacular song, "The Murder Ballad" (1938), among others. In a piece of writing that is sensitive both to the sociological facts of unemployment, policing, and the prison system as well as to the music—whose primary purpose, he reminds us, is after all to "produce 'funky dope rhymes' for our listening pleasure"—²⁸ he captures well his basic point in an epigraph from Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: "Oppressed peoples cannot avoid admiring their own nihilists, who are the ones most dramatically saying 'No!' and reminding others that there are worse things than death" (quoted in "KR," p. 1).²⁹

Kelley importantly contests the idea that gangsta rappers "merely celebrat[e] gang violence" and, without claiming that all descriptions of violence in the music are simply metaphors or that violence is not at times glorified, he zeroes in on gangsta's typically artful reversals, as when Ice

28. Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: The 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," typescript, p. 290; hereafter abbreviated "KR." This essay will appear in Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994) and in the long-awaited anthology, *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. Eric Perkins (Philadelphia, 1995).

29. See Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), p. 629.

Cube sums up the economic logic of gangsterism: “‘Broke niggas make the best crooks’” (“KR,” pp. 288, 293). In this way the essay marks the sheer verbal productivity, intertextual imageries, and traditional tropes that implicitly push rap past its petrified status as a problem. But because the essay was originally commissioned to deal specifically with the L.A. scene (which Kelley knew personally from his high school years in Pasadena), he turns his talents on a subject that has already been given blanket coverage, and once more the intricate stories of East Coast rap in its new-school phase go unanalyzed. But quibbles with the essay belong, perhaps, only with his claim that “gangsterism is integral to all hardcore Hip Hop” (“KR,” p. 326); and the very strengths of the performance highlight a need to supplement his message-oriented textualism of method with a more “interstitial” popular cultural reading.

Popular culture does not yield itself like a book. The hermeneutic targets involve words and also flow, which can itself be textual and contextual. As an aesthetic experience, rap demands, thus, an attentiveness to the specific scene or sites of its consumption not only in, but of, space where it makes relations between pacified public and newly active private territories dissonant. Wu-Tang’s “bass emanations bumpin’ from their trunk” is a reclamation of space marked off-limits by unacceptable authority. And it is basically an ethical decision not to turn away from upsetting social truths when a person allows their bedroom serenity in early morning to be upset by freaked-out verses about racism, pain, and mayhem. Kelley makes a similar point in passing when he writes that rap’s “music and expressive styles have literally become weapons in a battle over the right to occupy public space. Frequently employing high decibel car stereos and boom boxes, black youth not only ‘pump up the volume’ for their own listening pleasure, but also as part of an indirect, ad hoc war of position” (“KR,” p. 305). A greater examination of what Henri Lefebvre calls the production of space would yield a criticism highly relevant to rap’s (largely resented) public audibility.³⁰

Popular culture can also be better approached through the circuits of consumption or through the ways that text signifies in the ideological matrix of social symbols. Because popular culture is information already processed, that is, easily made sense of, the emphasis on content in much popcult criticism needs to be rethought. With minor exceptions found in the elusive jargons of youth or ethnicity, the critic is superfluous at the hermeneutic level of statement. Researchers do enter the terrains of the unknown when they examine the medium, or the way the availability of certain technical resources dictate productive form, or the behind-the-scenes deals, or, conversely, the resonant symbolic structures in which the

30. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; London, 1991).

artifact fits. But when they interpret the thing itself at the level of verbal meaning, they are making something redundantly obvious.

This point is grasped brilliantly in one of the finest works of rap criticism to appear thus far—Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*. For Rose, hip-hop can be accurately gauged only by looking at a highly overdetermined collision of urban poetry, changing 1980s technologies, and complex music-industry maneuvering. Together they conspire, institutionally, to mold rap's art before the cuts ever hit wax. Giving evidence everywhere of having spent years in saturation contact with the music, she also explores the companion world of music-industry representatives, lawyers, and producers in order to give a sense of the obstacles in everyday business to the articulation of an innovative and (in those circles) culturally odd or "undisciplined" black urban sensibility. Taking issue with David Toop—who in many ways got to these points first—she makes the excellent observation that rap "is not simply a linear extension of other orally based African-American traditions . . . [but] a complex fusion of orality and technology."³¹

While some of her reliance on the overfamiliar issues of violent images and moral breakdown are less interesting—and she, too, plays the L.A. card prominently and often—she offers an indispensable look at rap's important relationship to technology, above all to high-tech digital sampling machines and the crucial transgressions by rap producers of traditional engineering-booth decorum in their use of "fat sonic boom[s]" and "low-frequency resonance."³² These central aspects of hip-hop art are almost never explored. The book in that way is a communications-study critique of industry limits and potentials in the creation of popular musics as a whole, with hip-hop as a very full case study. In one of its chapters, the book also provides the most sustained analysis anywhere of black women rappers and rap's sexual politics. Even more important, in assessing the troubled exchange between business institutions and community creation, the book gets into the rap nitty-gritty—the pumped-up volume, the looping drum beats, the naming of groups, the structures of repetition and reconfiguration—which are explained in the convincing context of individual artists and specific cuts.³³ Kelley, too, in a series of side-comments throughout his essay, writes that although he emphasizes lyrics, he "also tries to deal with form, style and aesthetics"

31. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N. H., 1994), p. 85.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

33. One does not have to agree necessarily with Kelley's extravagant jacket blurb for *Black Noise* ("the finest thing ever written on hip hop") to notice that Rose along with Brian Cross, Armond White, Jonathan Scott, and Kelley himself are some of the newer rap critics producing the work that rap deserves. Both Kelley's essay and Rose's book appeared only in the late stages of writing this essay.

("KR," p. 284), a point made fully in his closing addendum printed in italics: "*Hip Hop is first and foremost music, 'noize' produced and purchased to drive to, rock to, chill to, drink to, and occasionally dance to. . . . You simply can't just read about it; it has to be heard, volume pumping, bass in full effect*" ("KR," p. 326).

So far, two kinds of work have approximated this approach. We have, first, the archival ventures into rap's origins. Without rehearsing that story in detail, I would point out that such studies—exemplified best by Toop's *Rap Attack* and Costello and Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*—make understanding DJ style possible. History tends to clarify. Back through the first Bronx pioneers (Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and others) to reggae toasting and beyond, the stories give the flavor of the clubs, the basements, and the rooftops without which today's noize is rootless, borderless, and all mixed up. Even more important, these studies give a reason for caring by delivering rap over to the sanctities of tradition. On this, Toop says:

Whatever the disagreements over lineage in the rap hall of fame or the history of hip hop, there is one thing on which all are agreed. 'Rap is nothing new', says Paul Winley. Rap's forebears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJs, Bo Diddley, the bebop singers, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammad Ali, acappella and doo-wop groups, ring games, skip-rope rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the dozens, all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia. No matter how far it penetrates into the twilight maze of Japanese video games and cool European electronics, its roots are still the deepest in all contemporary Afro-American music.³⁴

Most of the historical commentary recounts this story. Although necessary, it again moves us away from what is specific to rap. This vision of a network in which all African-Caribbean-American creativity is spiritually linked should not so much be denied as added to. Toasts, for example, have much more to do with hip-hop aesthetics than Cab Calloway does; the two are incomparable as sources since the former has that essential quality of an improvised voice-over covering a preexisting musical track.

Again, genealogies displace us from the important arena of the listener. We learn nothing, for instance, of how post-Grandmaster Flash or post-Run DMC rapping (c. 1980) is an entirely different animal from Gil Scott-Heron and H. Rap Brown, since in the former we have already that precise combination of a desperate urban thematics, a driving (and "borrowed") beat, and the outrageous pseudonyms of the later rap posse. Somehow, that unruly set of musics bridging Public Enemy in the ancient past (c. 1987) with, say, the Freestyle Fellowship today, comprises a sort

34. Toop, *The Rap Attack*, p. 19.

of unit. And that unit—that particular short stretch from the mid-1980s until now (the so-called New School)—has spurred the books, the debate, and the runaway explosion of rap record contracts. When I write *rap*, it is this unit I have in mind. Hence, Winley notwithstanding, rap is new.

Second, valuable work has been done about rap structure: how the music is played, on what instruments, how it is put together. Here one finds the greatest attention to hip-hop aesthetics, although in its own way clipped and abstract. Without any of Rose's persistence or depth of analysis, the *de rigueur* gesture in such an essay begins with a point about technology. In the words of A Tribe Called Quest's Q-Tip:

What older people don't understand is that rappers like me, KRS, Heavy, Latifah, Lyte grew up not fortunate enough to have our parents pay for piano lessons or sax lessons. All we had was transmissions coming out of the speaker. So of course, being the great scientists that we are, we were going to take whatever we got to make something out of it. So we took the music we had and put rhythms over it, because our parents didn't have the loot to afford instruments.³⁵

With this point about technology established, the critic then clarifies the basics of the hip-hop sound. Piece after piece covers this ground. As in Richard Shusterman's smart essay "The Fine Art of Rap," analysis of hip-hop aesthetics becomes a patient and obligatory march through the universal features of the form: the rhythmic voice-over derived from the radio DJ toast; the sample, the scratch, the break, and the punch phrase.

Another important, although much less exploited, subject (about which much more needs to be written) concerns the structure of the rap group itself: the MC (the one who does the rapping), the DJ (who chooses and arranges the samples), the producer (who mixes the sound in the studio, choreographs the loops) and the crew, who sometimes generate the raw sound used in the recording, or are just advisors, friends, accompanying vocalists, inspirations, and fellow rapping celebs who give the group its character and identity, often floating among groups and overlapping several, having names distinct from the groups themselves—the 5% Nation, the Flavor Unit, the Lench Mob, the Bomb Squad, and so on.

Apparently not all rap literature has been taken up with targetting or (as in the case of Kelley, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Paul Gilroy, and others) sympathetically representing the gangsta, but most of the post-L.A. writing has.³⁶ And even the best of the archival and structural work only prepares one for understanding. It falls short of creating a confident

35. Gordon Chambers and Joan Morgan, "Droppin' Knowledge: A Rap Roundtable," *Essence* 23 (Sept. 1992): 85.

36. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "2 Live Crew, Decoded," *New York Times*, 19 June 1990, p. A23, and Paul Gilroy, "It's a Family Affair," in *Black Popular Culture*, pp. 303–16.

dialogue among dedicated listeners. Some of the work, though, does feel its way there. Shusterman's essay, for example, goes beyond a taxonomy of features by entering a normative celebration of the aesthetic as a whole. He speaks of "linguistic subtlety" and "polysemic complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality [that] can sometimes rival that of high art's so-called 'open work'"; rap dismantles "the prepackaged and wearily familiar into something stimulatingly different" ("FAR," pp. 615, 618). He is even stronger when he goes to the heart of the matter: "No notational score could transmit [rap's] crazy collage of music, and even the lyrics cannot be adequately conveyed in mere written form, divorced from their expressive rhythm, intonation, and surging stress and flow" ("FAR," p. 621). The problem is that he has no other conceptual peg to hang his comments on than postmodernism, and so he ends up falling out of the flow and (again) developing a style of talk that violates rap's all-important feel. By dwelling on rap as a postmodern form, Shusterman acts too much the agent of alien black youth in the fuddy-duddy surroundings of the academy. In some ways this is an unavoidable stance, but it is also illustrative of the journey rap has to travel to lure critics onto its own ground.

I make no claims of having resolved this problem, but I would argue that as a first step we need a different theoretical apparatus than the familiar one of postmodernism. Or is the problem deeper than that? Would salvaging the aesthetic merely petrify rap in much the way that jazz has become a museum piece under the relentless admiration of the buffs? There are two responses to this worry. Jazz was never rude in rap's sense. Amiri Baraka's incomparable essays on jazz describe with precision that tension between a bebop of "nonconformity, musically as well as socially . . . a music of rebellion," and a music centered crucially in the Village world of "artists and writers, intellectuals and bohemians, the struggling and the poseurs."³⁷ Jazz never had rap's air of the criminal. Although underground, bebop's struggles were over "the primacy of improvisation" as pitched against European classical music, a digging down into the "heavy rhythmic flesh and blood" of the black majority to articulate not a mere technique but a whole (black) attitude that the critical amateurs rarely fathomed.³⁸ Its rise was inseparable for Baraka from the upward mobility of blacks brought on by the relative prosperity of the war years. Rap is much harder to petrify, at least by appreciating it as art. (A kind of commercial gutting, as remarked below, poses a different and more likely danger.) The point would not be making rap an exhibit of

37. Amiri Baraka, "Greenwich Village and African-American Music," in Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Amina Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York, 1987), pp. 184, 181.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

delight and fascination but, rather, moving it in that direction against the stream.³⁹

Shusterman's essay does not tame the music's form, but, given the danger of his approach, he does not, as he should, warn us against aestheticization. He is also incorrect about the form on one vital point, and I want to begin from here to plot out a rap appreciation. On the matter of sampling, for example, he writes: "Though artists have always borrowed from each other's works, the fact was generally ignored or implicitly denied through the ideology of originality, which posed a sharp distinction between original creation and derivative borrowing. Postmodern art like rap undermines this dichotomy" ("FAR," p. 617). On the contrary, originality—the breakthrough sound—inheres in the aesthetic. It is what the boast—the one great constant of rap's content—is based on.

2. *The Philosophy*

We begin with three neglected aspects of rap's ideological constitution, its background noise: (1) excess; (2) regenerative chaos; and (3) the form of all black forms.

1) The central aesthetic of rap is excess; it is saturation, an infinite and disposable productivity. What was new two months ago is no longer, which is the exact opposite of pop R&B in which the same twelve cuts are played endlessly over the course of an entire year. In rap, every cut has an album, every album its group, every group (and here's part of the point) its posse and its extended family of groupies, hangers-on, journeymen rappers, savants, intellectual apologizers and promoters—all of them tomorrow's rappers or elements in the indefinitely interchangeable components of another group or posse. As a matter of ritual they are shouted out in the songs as being in the house, and because of this waterfall of unfamiliar names listeners in the commercial sphere of radio and (less so) dance hall feel perplexed, left behind, not included.

Thus the best DJs (Kid Capri, DJ Red Alert, Funkmaster Flex, and others) cannot, like the white jazz aficionados or the erudite scholars of delta blues with their outlandish masteries of the arcana of performance

39. The warning posed by Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in "Jazz and the White Critic" (1963) must be taken to heart. He particularly singles out the efforts of white critics to formalize and institutionalize jazz in a celebration of "technique"—submitting the music to a "conditioned appreciation," or defining jazz "as an art . . . that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy" (Jones, "Jazz and the White Critic," *Black Music* [New York, 1967], p. 14). This is not my intention here. Both the music and the time were different. Although an appreciation—and a "formal" one at that—the effort here argues that rap's self-referencing demand *to be art* (an obstacle jazz did not face in the same way almost from the start) moves one squarely towards rap's "socio-cultural philosophy."

history, be outside of hip-hop production looking in as amateurs (although—as I am implying here—a much larger sector of amateurs would help rap occupy a stronger political redoubt). The publicizers in this world are often rappers themselves, or part of the rappers' crew. What might at first appear a deformity caused by commodification—rapping becomes mere wrapping in the sense that its emphasis on invention is a kind of planned obsolescence—is rather an attempt to outwit the style of the “new” by making the new serve the black community as a defense against appropriation. The accelerated aging process of the rap classic leads to greater sales and more star slots but also to a frenetic informational overload that keeps those frontin' at bay.

Unable to escape what David James in an essay on punk has called “the evaporation of presence”—the displacement of the work from its “intrinsic pleasure” and its original “telos”—rap's transgressiveness has still managed to evade “the rapidity with which [punk's] negativity was drained.”⁴⁰ Appropriation, nevertheless, is already well under way; Ice Cube, appearing on St. Ides malt liquor commercials; Kriss Kross, pushing soft drinks; Digital Underground's Humpty, playing straightman to Charles Barkley in the Nike commercials, are renegades on tap. I have been quietly referencing here, though, a certain strain in rap, primarily East Coast, that seems to me neither gangsta nor susceptible on principle to the blandishments of ad money. At the same time it is more openly thoughtful about rap's preciousness and more belligerently eager to defend it against the sellouts within.⁴¹ This strain—including Gang Starr, A Tribe Called Quest, Brand Nubian, Main Source, Poor Righteous Teachers, Black Sheep, EPMD, and KRS-One—is also, not coincidentally, more interesting musically than most (not all) of its West Coast partners. A major genre of hip-hop is dedicated to pointing an accusing finger at the rap sellout. There are dozens of examples, but none more straight up than Main Source's “Fakin' the Funk”:

At the age of nineteen (ya heard the scene)
Too many MCs that do not come clean,
Frontin' on feelin' hard times and rhymes,
You go to their crib and you see no signs
Of a nigger on the brink, 'cause that's a prank.
(What's the attitude when you got a million in the bank?)

40. David E. James, “Poetry/Punk/Production: Some Recent Writing in LA,” *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London, 1988), pp. 165, 175.

41. A typical example from KRS-One, the hip-hop philosopher par excellence, appears in Justin Pritchard, “Still the One,” *Downtown Resident*, 18–31 Dec. 1993, p. 15: “Rap comes out of hip hop. Hip hop is our culture. If you destroy hip hop there's no more rap. The illusion is that rap stands on its own. That's bullshit.”

You're fakin' the funk
Talkin' that gangsta hoopla, you're prob'ly a punk.⁴²

As crucial as this steadfast traditionalism might be in dodging media assimilation, the more resilient defense lies, again, in the interstices. For unlike punk, rap is less about rejecting the culture industry than demanding a place within it on its own terms. Incorporation in that sense—always a more explosive issue for black people than for the alienated white musicians of punk—is precisely its telos.

In a variety of ways, the function of excess radically departs from punk's neomodernist strategy of opting out of commercialism per se. Passively, excess marks out the vitality and intensity of the message as though there were so many previously mute now speaking that the finite vessels of CD and TV could barely contain them. But excess also requires being in, rather than about, the culture. There is no sense, in other words, of lingering over the great work of even last year, of admiring its art (although, naturally, rappers are constantly learning from this past, stealing from it, copying it, often brazenly). One does not drive through the neighborhood playing a two- or three-month-old cut, however good. The cut played and enjoyed in public must be previously unheard or at least privy to the few on the leading edge—the sharers of mastermix tapes. The paradoxical combination of a disposable canon and a flagrant theft of riffs from last year's classic for this month's novelty is so obvious to the dedicated rap listener that the lack of allusion to another's property shows that this crazy productivity is a conscious aesthetic rather than a by-product of a commercially viable music created in a highly competitive atmosphere.

And it is more than simply style. Excess helps protect the scene from the taming already taking place in the act of an overpowering commercial acceptance. Early rap songs of only three years ago that talked about the scandal of R&B stations refusing to play them (Yomo and Maulkie's "Mockingbird," Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype") are already part of a bygone era.⁴³ In New York, all of the major commercial black

42. Main Source, "Fakin' the Funk," *White Men Can't Rap*, Wild Pitch/EMI 99087, 1992. A few other examples are listed below in the appendix under the heading "Keep Rap Hardcore," but a special mention should probably go to 3rd Bass's "Pop Goes the Weasel," *Derelects of Dialect*, Def Jam, c 47869, 1991. A now-defunct white band of rappers sensitive to the charge of not paying dues, 3rd Bass hit a particularly high note in one verse: "Hip hop got turned into hit pop/ the second a record was No. 1 on the pop charts/ But don't forget all the ones with the heart they got their start/ in the ghetto/ Let no one forget about the hard part."

43. See Yomo and Maulkie, "Mockingbird," *Are U Xperienced?* Ruthless Records, 91760, 1991, and Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype," *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, Def Jam, 44303, 1988.

stations *feature* rap at various parts of the day (usually prime time), and some of rap's most innovative, experimental, and traditionally non-commercial artists have begun two-tiered careers. Gang Starr's Guru, for example, cuts the hardcore for the inside, but he also dummies up duets with the R&B artist Mary K. Blige for the softcore sounds of KISS-FM (New York).

Indeed the rappers may themselves be revelling in the high-chart profiles of crossover fame even in the photos they choose for their own CD covers. What then drives the art forward as a form in the face of the "pop weasel" is simply the act of flooding the market with more music, dropping names of unknowns that only the in-the-know know, and doing it as if it were all an old story. This flooding also involves the listing of stage names of the crew who in rap are curiously anonymous and, again, infinitely productive because the names are tried on—Grand Puba, MC Pooh, Hurricane, Flavor Flav. In no other musical form are its artists, without exception, filtered in this manner from the audience. And in no other form are the names so consistently suggestive of the iconoclasm of blackness.

2) Tonal clash, the second element of rap's ideology, correlates with excess in that both promote noninclusion. Tonal clash is the noize itself, the brittle overload, the dissonant rampage of sound, the starting and stopping of the scratch and the punch phrase that tumbles and trips forward (or backward) keeping the listener jerky, unrelaxed, on edge. There is no aural stream to lounge in, or patterning to sleepwalk through. Those who despise rap's fraying of the nerves are not hearing different sounds from the devotees. They are simply missing the point. The techno-screach and the thud-thudding assault of the bass line unsettle the ears in the name of simulating pain; they please by being unpleasant. These technical details amount to regenerative chaos, which I see as insistently homeopathic. It does its job best in inappropriate places: the bedroom in early morning; the car on a cruise; a mixed party with older friends. And because it purges the grainy residue of social chaos taken in from outside, blanking it out in the way radio jamming matches the offensive wavelengths wave for wave, it reminds one of our social troubles only by offering tools of endurance.

In that sense, rap is often not social realism so much as frisson. One thinks of Cypress Hill's stringy, twanging background to a foreshortened clip from the 1960s hit "Duke of Earl"—all a buildup to a story, told with hallucinogenic indifference, about blowing someone away with a shotgun after drinking a forty-ounce can of beer. This is a nightmare sound that takes one down, but then through, to another side; in which dancers at the Ritz, having memorized it all, wave their arms while singing "sawed-off shotgun, hand on the pump, left hand on a 40, puffin' on a blunt" in euphoric unison as a kind of charm against the thing itself or (alternately)

as a securer way of experiencing the same thing.⁴⁴ Similarly in Black Sheep's haunting syncopation in "Still in the Ghetto," the sound is designed to keep listeners a half-step off stride in the music flow, the background to lyrics of brilliant and intentional illogic, mimicking at the level of sound the same uncertainties as the narrator, who wants out of poverty, chants "give me a job so I don't have to rob/ why do I want to kill?"⁴⁵

3) More important, rap is the form of all black forms. As remarked above, there are limits to how closely one can hitch rap up to, say, Bo Diddley (although the immediate Bronx precursors of post-Public Enemy production—Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc—are another matter). But rap is not simply an innovation either, not simply to the 1980s and 1990s what Motown was to the 1960s or bebop to the 1940s and 1950s. It does not simply assume its place in the lineage of African-American musical creation extending from the spiritual, through ragtime and dixieland, up through all the other well-known mutations of the twist, electric boogie, and new jack swing.

For rap tries to be (in an Afro-conscious gesture peculiar to the present conjuncture) both the encyclopedia and the built-in commentary on all the African cultural production that existed before it.⁴⁶ This is precisely where those arguing for its postmodernism go wrong. For this is not a crazy quilt of earlier forms with (as Shusterman put it) "no respect for period, genre, and style distinctions," a plundering that "cannibalizes" and "transform[s] everything it cuts and takes into its funky collage" ("FAR," p. 624). It is instead a homage, an aural museum and display case, or perhaps (to stretch the matter) a religious veneration not unlike the fetish from which the listener derives power. Quotations from Dick Gregory or Louis Farrakhan, documentary testimony from penitentiary prisoners, samplings from the Jackson Five or Little Richard: these are not innocent fragments jumbled nonhierarchically next to rap's ubiquitous allusions to popular culture as a whole (Keebler cookie commercials, *Sally Jessy Raphael*, the film *Ghost*). Although alluding at every turn in the lingua franca of masscult imagery, rap in its message-oriented mindset wants especially to codify, protect, and exalt the black traditions. Rap is, then, to its creators, a summation or culmination. It is, in that explicitly

44. Cypress Hill, "Hand on the Pump," *Cypress Hill*, RuffHouse, 47889, 1991. A blunt is a cigar (traditionally the inexpensive Phillies available in most neighborhood grocery stores) with marijuana or hashish mixed in.

45. This cut has not yet appeared in any rap compilation or available Black Sheep CD. It was obtained from a tape of J-Smooth's "Underground Railroad," WBAI-FM, New York.

46. In this sense, rap is not unlike the strategy of Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* except that in rap the encyclopedia sits within the very mass cultural form cited, literally, in the novel itself. A black breakthrough sound periodically emerges with a crossrace dance craze challenging white metaphysical order. See Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972).

African style, a wholism: everything African in the same package, all at once.

It follows that whoever asks, What do you think of recent rap fusion? does not understand rap. Rap is nothing but fusion. The veneration for the African styles of the past most often takes place not, as in the examples above, in explicit and localized allusions but in whole subgenres within rap as a general movement: rap in the funk tradition (Brand Nubian, Digital Underground, Del tha Funkée Homosapien); reggae roots (Poor Righteous Teachers, KRS-One, Jungle Brothers); jazz/blues tradition (A Tribe Called Quest, Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, the Guru); R&B smooth (MC Lyte, Big Daddy Kane); Latin flavor (Cypress Hill, the Beatnuts, Kid Frost); the shamelessly second-order sound of radio- or candy-rap (Positive K, Arrested Development, Digable Planets, Heavy D, Kriss Kross). A subsidiary reason gangsta style stands out and commands most of the commentary is that it is the one genre without clear, commercially established, musical predecessors.

This deep structure of African intertextuality explains in part why rap's constantly prophesied demise has not taken place, for it is not a single style to be used up and passed over in the face of tastes challenged by media burnout. It is rather a mode of commentary in which African-American achievement and struggle are recorded and promoted; it is not the thing but the medium.

3. *An Appreciation*

I began by marking out the poles of rap criticism in order to suggest that between the one and the other lay the interesting details. A proper appreciation relies on individualizing the music. What, then, would a sophisticated rap commentary look like at the level of the individual cut? What are the kinds of inquiry appropriate to its art?

To discover answers would mean, I think, looking harder at those overlooked components of the hip-hop sound. Of all the formal components, the beat is the most often discussed. But what about voice? And what about the genius of the mix? Let us imagine for a moment what it would say to a reading audience if a rap essayist got off the level of speaking about the image of rap and instead started debating the virtues of Terminator X's mixing on side A of Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* and then began to compare X's style with the much less baroque, much more understated phrasing of DJ Premier's mixing on Gang Starr's "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?"⁴⁷

47. See Public Enemy, "Contract on the World Love Jam," *Fear of a Black Planet*, Def Jam, 45413, 1993, and Gang Starr, "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?" *Step in the Arena*, Chrysalis, 21798, 1990.

Any popular musical history of the West would surely linger over the tonalities of Frank Sinatra's or Sara Vaughn's voice, deliberating over accents, subtle risings, or pauses. Why, then, not in rap where tone is not only varied and inventive but exposed even more than in more explicitly sung musical forms? What would a criticism be like that spoke of Yo Yo's delivery (especially her playacting); the headstrong new jack energies of Jeru the Damaja; the almost avuncular ease of Ice-T; the playful, silly speech of Brand Nubian's Derek X (now Sadat X); or the mellow bite of Gang Starr's Guru?

Two likely roads into the form of the cut appear around the lyrics but not in them. The beauty of the rap experience, apart from the mix and the beat, comes in a moment of surprise and savoring at (1) the quality of the rhyme and (2) the quality of the voice. Rhyming is obligatory, as in most popular music, and also the site of signature. The point is not to show that one can rhyme but that one can rhyme differently. In general, the prosody depends on stretching it. The lines are not written of equal length, for the most part, but with a mind to message and precision of idiom. It therefore becomes a display of MC finesse to fit the verses to the unyielding arithmetic of the drum track, which is accomplished in two opposite ways: piling up words delivered with lightning quickness in a speed dub or, conversely, stretching them out with teetering absences. "Still in the Ghetto" is a particularly laden example of this affective tug-of-war. I indicate accented syllables in boldface and exaggerated breaks (not just natural pauses) with the symbol (*):

Peep it, I'll **freak** it, they **sneak** it across the **border** (*)
 Not troublemakers and we're not takin' your **order** (*)
 The **warden** don't **want** to be deceived (*)
 I'll fuck for some change now I feel **fuckin'** naive (*)
 'Cause I'm livin' my day **beat** in the City, you **scum**,
 I'm in a different one daily, and it's **yours**, that's the **one**
 That got trapped by a crooked **cop**, **shoot**, **sure shot**,
 Puttin' **tech**-nine emphatic with people in **plots** (*)
 Now that I go pass go, (*) I don't know, (*) yo **bro**, (*)
 I feel like I'm still in the ghetto.⁴⁸

If the great ally of the country-western lyric is the pun, the ally of the rap lyric is the caesura.

In a more figurative sense, but just as important, stretching it can mean the intentional preposterousness of the rhyme itself. Here we are in a world of the tour de force where, in the malleable accents of the oral, near-rhyming is taken to an extreme. In this world, *hardcore* rhymes with

48. Black Sheep, "Still in the Ghetto."

*proper; had this rhymes with madness; answer rhymes with chance ta; defeat us when rhymes with Peterson, and so on.*⁴⁹

A list of virtues would be needed to catalogue the tonalities of the MC voice. Tension (Ice Cube), mellowness (Big Daddy Kane), tease (Skoob of Das EFX), speed (Treach of Naughty by Nature), articulation (Ice-T): all the great ones have their strengths. All have what might be called an exaggerated intonation, a sort of stage personality, that brings out the signature virtue. As Guru puts it in “Mostly tha Voice”:

I got mad rhymes
Still it's mostly the voice that gets you up
It's mostly the voice that makes you buck
A lotta rappers got flavor, and some got skills
But if your voice ain't dope, then you need to chill.⁵⁰

Listening to a lot of rap, one will find more failed MCs than successful ones; and playing Tone Loc next to Grand Puba shows what bad and good can be (in that order). It is a good exercise in any appreciation to show up the wack MC by playing him (or her) next to a more accomplished artist. Ice-T's duet with Donald D. on “Lost in a Freestyle” demonstrates very well why the one and not the other has so many followers.⁵¹

But the matter of voice also plays out in a more general sense. The aural universe of the form is one in which black urban speech is a home sound. Hip-hop jargon, cultural signifiers like Farrakhan, and the deeply recognizable dialects of black youth in saturation quantities place street blackness as an environmental norm. It is a familiar ploy in rap to bring white speech in abruptly for the purpose of parody or ridicule. Given the momentum of black as a home sound, white language comes off as an alien oddity. Whiteness is made ethnic with wonderful effect in Yomo and Maulkie's “Society's Relentless,” NWA's “Fuck tha Police,” and Public Enemy's “Incident at 66.6 FM.”⁵²

Before making any of these moves, we need to put a face on the different styles and groups. The media discourse of rap should give way

49. My point is not to make the case for rap's uniqueness but for rap's largely unnoticed or misunderstood qualities. We can find preposterous rhymes in the nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll and Ogden Nash, of course, as well as in other popular musical lyrics — for example, George Jones and Tammy Wynette's “No, we're not the jet set/ We're the old Chevrolet set/ Our steak and martinis/ Is draft beer with wienies” (George Jones and Tammy Wynette, “[We're Not] the Jet Set,” *Greatest Hits*, Epic, 34716, 1977). Rap is distinctive because it combines high moral and political seriousness with an otherwise gratuitous rhyming display where posture is the message.

50. Gang Starr, “Mostly tha Voice,” *Hard to Earn*, Chrysalis, 28435, 1994.

51. See Donald D., “Lost in a Freestyle,” *Notorious*, Epic, 45298, 1992.

52. See Yomo and Maulkie, “Society's Relentless,” *Are U Experienced?*; NWA, “Fuck tha Police,” *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 57102, 1989; and Public Enemy, “Incident at 66.6 FM,” *Fear of a Black Planet*.

to a nuance of trends and personalities—a move that the singling out of Ice-T, Ice Cube, and 2 Live Crew has mocked. This is possible only through a process of individualization: an actual listing of genres, themes, and individual trends within the field. The appendix to this essay, therefore, offers a sort of mapping of fellow travelers with the view of creating informed listeners.⁵³

4. A Final Note on Rap Politics

Even if one concentrated on lyrics, rap politics would not be captured best by the nine-toting gangsta—the allegorical bogeyman of such songs as Ice-T's "My Lethal Weapon."⁵⁴ On the contrary, even on the rudimentary level of pure content politics would belong more with the preacher than the gangsta. That politics is captured instinctively by the lead song titles of an early (recently reissued) Gang Starr CD: "Knowledge," "Positivity," "Manifest."⁵⁵ These three cuts, with simplicity and scope, cover better than any other what rap is about—that is, testifyin' as much as signifyin'.

But, against this spirit, Greg Tate has recently argued that rap has failed because it will never "lead a revolution." The essay again raises the Los Angeles rebellion in the opening sentences, and in that respect alone it plays in a familiar register. He is right when he says that a lot of hip-hop is not the "voice of the oppressed" but "b-boys and . . . b-boy wanna-bees." And he makes a good point that there is not enough self-criticism in rap—self-criticism being (in his words) the "earmark of all true revolutionaries"—or that much of rap is not so much an expression of rage as "another momentary containment of it" ("SF," p. 15).⁵⁶

But, despite Tate's own wide credibility among rappers and his heroic role as an early promoter of rap's serious art, he misses a crucial point. One cannot hold rappers responsible for a story invented by the reviewers, namely, that rap is a bid for revolution. Rap's hardcore, although clearly rebellious, do not talk about sparking rebellions. They talk about rap as a community bulletin board, as black mass media. In Chuck D.'s words, "it's not singing where you lose it. No, it's rapping where you

53. Rappers have invented a vocabulary that is changing English in ways black culture traditionally has. Initiation into the cool has always disdained explanation. But the principle of noninclusion intensifies this process in rap. The words and phrases are almost never defined by the rap magazines or the songs themselves.

54. As Ice-T points out in the song, his lethal weapon is his *mind*. See Ice-T, "Lethal Weapon," *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech . . . Just Watch What You Say*, Sire Records, 26028, 1989.

55. See Gang Starr, *No More Mr. Nice Guy*, Wild Pitch, 98709, 1992.

56. Tate's piece was echoed by a later essay he wrote in the Sunday *New York Times* on De La Soul; see Tate, "They Go Where Few Rappers Dare to Follow," *New York Times*, 17 Oct. 1993, p. H34. Trying to salvage the few good rappers from the mostly bad, he called them "thinking persons' hip-hoppers."

get it. . . . It's the black CNN we never had."⁵⁷ Or, as Ice Cube puts it, "rap music is our network. It's the only way we can talk to each other, almost uncensored."⁵⁸ They talk about localized education. The gush over the L. A. riots and "Cop Killer" is the press's line, including the black press, to cash in on the deliberately misrepresented icon of the gangsta; that is, it twists the literary icon (the raggamuffin) into the street punk himself to play upon reliable fears in order to make rap matter as a subject in the only way people are prepared to allow it to matter, that is, as an issue rather than as an art form.

What most rappers are proposing about themselves is not nearly so grandiose as Tate's inflated portrayal. True, like every immensely popular and therefore potentially commercial trend, a second- and third-wave sweeps in to cop the original's sound and look. Among these (Hammer, Kriss Kross) a hip-hop philosophy as such does not explicitly appear. However, it does in the artists I have singled out above. Unless one is talking about the dilutors (or bokors), Tate's air of clinching the point is premature. Following custom, he takes the familiar shortcut of talking about rap's media construct instead of individual artists (a move, I have been arguing, that rap is especially prone to and one with unforeseen malignancies of judgment). But the thing to fix on is his embarrassment, both class and generational. He does not like to see MC Pooh with Arrested Development, or Yo Yo with Digable Planets. He seems to prefer the latter sort of group with their softcore swing, earnest moralities, and family flavor that, because they are not common in rap, provide a fund of badly needed "positive images."

But hip-hop does have a philosophy, and it is not about a rebellion in Los Angeles. The rappers talk about the music, about its structures, its innovations, its intertextualities. Again Q-tip: "African music . . . has been here since the beginning of time. The drum is the first instrument, and that's how we communicate, with drums. You understand? Rap is sort of like a cycle, what goes around comes around." Chuck D. puts it this way: "rap is *not* music per se. Rap is a vocal culture."⁵⁹ What do these statements mean? With some unanimity, statements like them can be found widely among the rap hardcore that I gestured to above. Rap is not, as Tate puts it, "agendaless." It simply has no political program in his sense. Negatively, of course, it offers a rich exposure of a domestic imperialism, and that is a kind of politics, of course.

And on these grounds Tate is often wrong even on the details. Thus, he claims that "during the gulf conflict hip-hop's war drums were deafeningly silent," even as Tupac Shakur (2Pac) was denouncing the war in a memorable line from *2Pacalypse Now*: "And then they try to send me off

57. Quoted in *Nation Conscious Rap*, p. 336.

58. "Nappy Happy: A Conversation with Ice Cube and Angela Y. Davis," *Transition*, no. 58 (1992): 178.

59. Chambers and Morgan, "Droppin' Knowledge," p. 85.

to Kuwait, give me a break/ How much shit can a nigger take?";⁶⁰ or Tate remarks dismissively that "I have yet to hear a rapper say that commodity fetishism is the true God of this Nation" when "Jussamen" by Das EFX is the very critique of commodity fetishism he asks for ("SE," p. 15); it playfully cites in the space of three minutes almost forty brand names as if to suggest the fractured mind-set of these men on the mic.⁶¹ Such a song is, in fact, a fellow to critiques of life under capitalism that arise explicitly in the lyrics of Paris, Yomo and Maulkie, and The Coup. Tate is simply wrong.

Nor is simple critique the outward limit of the hip-hop landscape. Formulating alternatives, rappers turn variously to Islam, vegetarianism, community self-defense schemes, blunt smoking, or visions of an emergent black bourgeoisie. Paris, Tupac, and The Coup (all Oakland based) often voice an implicit left agenda that sounds very much like the Panthers, and indeed Paris (in a nostalgic allusion to that legacy) speaks in one recent cut of "The Days of Old."⁶² In still other variants, Sister Souljah, Chuck D., and X Clan come out of the orbit of black Islam (although to very different degrees), and Souljah is an ardent segregationist.⁶³ At this level of detail, Tate's picture is vague and unconvincing. Accurate generalizations, however, can still be useful.

Some of the variables of rap politics—the hedonistic (blunt smoking), the religious (Islam), or the entrepreneurial—are unstable markers, shifting from performer to performer and from CD to CD in pursuit of two much more stable principles that contain the political significance of rap as a form. One of these is surely (and expectedly) cultural uplift. But, again, the call is found not only at the level of the cajoling lyric of the rap artist beckoning his listeners to stay in school but also in the social interstices. Rap represents the avid acceptance and interest by the white and propertied public of a cultural style that is not only recognizably black—like Motown, or the R&B of Natalie Cole—but black and rude. This is decisive. Rap is working class, lumpen, dispossessed, dirty, "uneducated." One can argue about the authenticity of its vision or about the class origins of its stars but not about the class character of its images, stories, and accents. This is a point that Tate misses, or, more properly, it is what

60. 2Pac, "I Don't Give a ****" *2Pacalypse Now*, Interscope, 4403, 1991.

61. See Das EFX, "Jussamen," *Dead Serious*, East-West, 98127, 1992. One can see this in many more glancing ways as well. The group name "Brand Nubian," for instance, signifies on the shallowness of the commercial slogan "brand new," reclaiming innovation for blackness.

62. See Paris, "The Days of Old," *Sleeping with the Enemy*, Scarface, 100, 1993 and *The Devil Made Me Do It*, Tommy Boy, 1030, 1990; and The Coup, *Kill My Landlord*, Wild Pitch, 89047, 1993. The studied approach to a history of resistance is implicit in Tupac's very name, taken from the Inca fighter against the Spanish conquest, Tupac Amaru, and the black liberationist exile now resident in Cuba—Assata Shakur (Jo Ann Chesimard).

63. To date, the best analysis of the role of black nationalism in rap is Decker, "The State of Rap."

prompts him to attack. The politics of rap, therefore, should properly be found in the interstices. It is about a transformation of outlook among black (and white) youth in the face of a commercially validated acceptance of . . . black youth—or, rather, not black youth in its entirety but that unsupple social image of youth as hard, brash, and resourceful. Rude culture is now so indulged in, worried over, fled from, fantasized, or studied in the rap lyric that followers of rap can only marvel at how lawyers woo—and how PR-types, columnists, and even presidential candidates take positions on—the street tough. This, I am suggesting, emboldens the previously ignored and, apart from encouraging the release of information about city life and police behavior in a vividly appreciable form, also leads to institutional openings.

These openings have to do with black business, a way of getting rich in an area more inviting of social commentary than sports or the tightly bordered openings of TV and film. Mike Davis has made a similar point with a very different intention, scorning the rappers (as Tate did) for being self-promoters only interested in the money.⁶⁴ He misses the point. Older debates over self-help schemes arise again in these new illusions about the general rise of a black music intelligentsia of fabulous wealth. The content of the illusion seems to make rap politically conservative. In one sense, it is so, since like all business, success depends on the massive failure of competitors. However it is not simply so.

One has to appreciate the mass stirrings and as-yet-undefined communities that rap unleashes. The lures of business success—with rage as one of its principal commodities—has an organizing effect in this structurally abandoned and targetted sector of U.S. capitalism. Even a massive failure of a generation of would-be rappers, even ploy and counterploy to keep rap off the airwaves or to tame it by acceptance itself, has the effect of shock to the social body. If the paradoxical strategy of choice for a political genre is to bring it into the category of art, the paradoxical strategy for a real community of unemployed and dispossessed is to bring it into the category of business. Neither will be achieved, but the very act of trying exposes the mendacities of power.

And, thus, at the core of rap lies business.⁶⁵ Farrakhan's message of financial community control is what fits most with Public Enemy's worldview, and it is why they cite him so often. It is also why we have that scene in *Boyz N the Hood* when the character played by Lawrence Fish-

64. See Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 87.

65. Again, with deliberate double entendre, many CD titles show the self-conscious awareness of this core even when it is not explicitly stated. EPMD's albums include *Strictly Business*, Profile, 57135, 1988; *Business as Usual*, Def Jam, 47067, 1990, and *Business Never Personal*, Ral, 52848, 1991. Similarly, Poor Righteous Teachers reinvokes the theme of community control in the title cut from their latest effort, *Black Business*, Profile, 1443, 1993. KRS-One and others are urging rap's mandate not be diluted by the quest for loot, and it is only in that sense (*pace* Cross) that rap is "not about a salary."

burne counsels his son and his son's friend in the heart of Compton while standing in a vacant lot looking up at a commercial billboard. Business will heal your soul, he says, and make the neighborhood liveable again. Tate and Davis conclude that rap politics, since it is not about an organized rebellion forecast (in some readings) by the L.A. riots, is therefore vacuous or a pose. But it is only the messy politics the poor live, or those who mouth for them. In the words of Jeru the Damaja, "Imma' get mine cuz the crew will get theirs."⁶⁶ Or, better, in that wonderful line from Public Enemy that transforms the timid act of reasoning with Power into the impatient act of affirming one's right to possess, "[One voice] The question is. . . . What it [another voice] What it is!"⁶⁷

Appendix

Hardcore amateurs pour over an array of rap offerings that simply have not been imagined very well in the literature. Everybody knows about rap in a loose sense from the newspapers, even if what they typically hear is (for the most part) the crossover sound. The focus of most of the criticism, on the other hand, is a world apart. It swings over to the underground specialists who are themselves performers or are deeply identified with an intricate, insider hip-hop culture. *Gangsta* just does not describe the majority of what is consumed or experienced by hardcore amateurs, nor does its counterpart (also an extreme, but at the other pole): the "p.c." rap of, say, Arrested Development, or the polished R&B swing of Salt 'n' Pepa. Much lies in the shadings, including appreciations of old left politics, comical send-ups, and sentimental croonings, and this is true for both black and white audiences.

Whenever the discussion is content, the emphasis is sure to be on "real life" stories from the congested inner city. When one looks at actual rap artifacts, though, a huge amount of the content turns out to be about history and strategy—not rampages over a wild and desperate present. By the same token, who would know from the public talk that rap has its straight love songs, as distinct from the much better known lyrics about "bagging bitches" (which, of course, also exist)? Similarly, while the point has been made by others that gangsta lyrics are often misunderstood—that lyrics about guns and killing are often metaphors of MC finesse (the conquering through style of other MC contenders)—the point should not be, as it often is, an isolated one. One could argue, for example, that gangsta itself—as well as being part of an overarching black folklore motif of the "baadman"—is also just a variation on a more fundamental feature

66. Part of a three-part freestyle rhyme on Gang Starr's "I'm the Man," *Daily Operation*, Chrysalis, F1-21910, 1992.

67. Public Enemy, "Contract on the World Love Jam."

of the rap form: the boast. This is where seeing rap in the context of its many genres modifies a vision of the whole.

The list below is meant to illustrate some of these points, as well as others made in the essay. For example, my argument that rap is as much testifyin' as signifyin' is suggested by the work listed under "Teaching"; and under "Gangster," I deliberately emphasize East Coast performers. Above all, the list is meant to graph the immense variety and range of the music side of the culture. My own positioning undoubtedly affects the list, which should be seen as representing work available on commercially available CDs rather than on private mixes or bootleg tapes—a common form of distribution among high school kids and those in the lower income brackets.

I. Rap's Musical Modes

- A. Funk tradition
- B. Jazz/blues tradition
- C. Reggae roots
- D. R & B smooth

II. Basic Rap Genres

- A. Teaching
 - 1. Politico/Historical (X — Afrocentric)
 - "Why Is That?" (Boogie Down Productions [KRS-One])
 - "Return of the Mecca" (Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth)
 - "My God Is a Powerful God" (Sister Souljah)
 - "Runaway Slave" (Showbiz and AG)⁶⁸
 - 2. Politico/Historical (Civil Rights, "Revo")
 - Kill My Landlord* (The Coup)
 - "I Don't Give a !!!!!" (2Pac)
 - "Concerto in X Minor" (Brand Nubian)
 - The Devil Made Me Do It* (Paris)⁶⁹
 - 3. National Uplift/Positive Images
 - "Niggas Gotta" (Sister Souljah)

68. Boogie Down Productions (KRS-One), "Why Is That?" *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop*, RCA/Jive, 1187, 1989; Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, "Return of the Mecca," *Mecca and the Soul Brother*, Elektra, 60948, 1992; Sister Souljah, "My God Is a Powerful God," *360 Degrees of Power*, Epic, 48713, 1992; and Showbiz and AG, "Runaway Slave," *Runaway Slave*, Payday/London, 828 334, 1992.

69. The Coup, *Kill My Landlord*, Wild Pitch, 89047, 1993; 2Pac, "I Don't Give a !!!!!" *2Pacalypse Now*, Interscope, 4403, 1991; Brand Nubian, "Concerto in X Minor," *All for One*, Elektra, 60946, 1990; and Paris, *The Devil Made Me Do It*, Tommy Boy, 1030, 1990.

- "You Played Yourself" (Ice-T)
- "Watch Roger Do His Thing" (Main Source)
- "Never Never Land" (U.M.C.'s)⁷⁰
- B. Love-Whine Romance
 - "Love Sick" (Gang Starr)
 - "When in Love" (MC Lyte)
 - "Lots of Lovin'" (Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth)
 - "Ebony and Harmony" (Eric B. and Rakim)
 - "All through the Night" (Tone Loc)⁷¹
- C. Prankster
 - "The Humpty Dance Awards" (Digital Underground)
 - "What Is a Booty?" (Del tha Funkée Homosapien)
 - "Two Minute Brothers" (BWP [Bytches With Problems])
 - "Hoes" (Yo Yo)
 - "Gangsta Bitch" (Apache)
 - "I Got a Man" (Positive K)⁷²
- D. Gangster
 - "Straight Outta Compton" (NWA)
 - "The Streets of New York" (Kool G. Rap and D. J. Polo)
 - "Put Ya Boots On" (Double XX Posse)
 - "Hardcore" (Redman)
 - AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Ice Cube)⁷³
- E. Pure Dance
 - "Ain't No Future in Yo Frontin'" (M. C. Breed)
 - "How Kool Can One Blackman Be" (Kool Moe Dee)
 - "Lost in a Freestyle" (Donald D.)

70. Sister Souljah, "Nigga's Gotta," *360 Degrees of Power*, Epic, 48713, 1992; Ice-T, "You Played Yourself" *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech . . . Just Watch What You Say*, Sire Records, 26028, 1989; Main Source, "Watch Roger Do His Thing," *Breaking Atoms*, Wild Pitch, 97543, 1991; and The U.M.C.'s, "Never Never Land," *Fruits of Nature*, Wild Pitch, 97544, 1991.

71. Gang Starr, "Love Sick," *Step in the Arena*, Chrysalis, 21798, 1990; MC Lyte, "When in Love," *Act Like You Know*, First Priority, 91731, 1991; Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, "Lots of Lovin'," *Mecca and the Soul Brother*, Elektra, 60948, 1992; Eric B. and Rakim, "Mahogany," *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*, MCA, 6410, 1990; and Tone-Loc, "All through the Night," *All through the Night* [EP], Polydor, 866 105, 1991.

72. Digital Underground, "The Humpty Dance Awards," *The Body-Hat Syndrome*, Tommy Boy, 1080, 1993; Del tha Funkée Homosapien, "What Is a Booty?" *I Wish My Brother George Was Here*, Elektra, 61133, 1991; BWP (Bytches With Problems), "Two Minute Brothers," *The Bytches*, Ral, 47068, 1991; Yo Yo, "Hoes," *Black Pearl*, East-West, 92120, 1992; Apache, "Gangsta Bitch," *Apache Ain't Shit*, Tommy Boy, 1068, 1993; and Positive K, "I Got a Man," *The Skills Dat Pay Da Bills*, Island, 14057, 1992.

73. NWA, "Straight Outta Compton," *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless, 57102, 1989; Kool G. Rap and D. J. Polo, "Streets of New York," *Wanted: Dead or Live*, Cold Chillin', 26165, 1990; Double XX Posse, "Put Ya Boots On," *Put Ya Boots On*, Big Beat, 14217, 1992; Redman, "Hardcore," *Whut? Thee Album*, Ral, 52967, 1992; and Ice Cube, *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, Priority Records, 57120, 1990.

- “Insane in the Brain” (Cypress Hill)
- “Mama Said Knock You Out” (LL Cool J)⁷⁴
- F. Radio Rap (Candy Rap)
 - Arrested Development
 - Digable Planets
 - Kriss Kross
 - Positive K

III. Recurrent Themes

- A. Boast 1: Words and minds are guns/winning the talent clash is “killing” the other
 - “Lethal Weapon” (Ice-T)
 - “I’m Mad” (EPMD)
 - “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” (Gang Starr)
 - “Word from the Wise” (Poor Righteous Teachers)⁷⁵
- B. Boast 2: I’m a great lover
 - “Ex Girl to Next Girl” (Gang Starr)
 - “The Lover in You” (Big Daddy Kane)
 - “All for One” (Brand Nubian)
 - “I Got Played” (Yo Yo)
 - “I Get Around” (2Pac)⁷⁶
- C. Boast 3: Pure boast
 - “Half Time” (Nasty Nas)
 - “Cleopatra” (Yo Yo)
 - “Still #1 [Freestyle]” (Boogie Down Productions)
 - “No Equal” (Beatnuts)⁷⁷
- D. Keep Rap Hardcore; do not commercialize it

74. M. C. Breed, “Ain’t No Future in Yo Frontin,’” *Rap Jams*, Priority, 7048, 1991; Kool Moe Dee, “How Kool Can One Blackman Be,” *Funke Funke Wisdom*, Zomba, 1388, 1991; Donald D., “Lost in a Freestyle,” *Notorious*, 45298, Epic, 1992; Cypress Hill, “Insane in the Brain” [maxi single], RuffHouse, 77019, 1992; and LL Cool J, “Mama Said Knock You Out,” *Mama Said Knock You Out*, Def Jam, 46888, 1990.

75. Ice-T, “Lethal Weapon,” *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech . . . Just Watch What You Say*, Sire Records, 26028, 1989; EPMD, “I’m Mad,” *Business as Usual*, Def Jam, 47067, 1990; Gang Starr, “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” *Step in the Arena*, Chrysalis, 21798, 1990; and Poor Righteous Teachers, “Word from the Wise,” *Holy Intellect*, Profile, 1289, 1992.

76. Gang Starr, “Ex Girl to Next Girl,” *Daily Operation*, Chrysalis, F1-21910, 1992; Big Daddy Kane, “The Lover in You,” *Prince of Darkness*, Cold Chillin’, 26715, 1991; Brand Nubian, “All for One,” *All for One*, Elektra, 60946, 1990; Yo Yo, “I Got Played,” *Make Way for the Motherlode*, East-West, 91605, 1990; and 2Pac, “I Get Around,” *Strictly 4 My Niggaz*, Interscope, 72737, 1993.

77. Nasty Nas, “Half Time” [maxi single], RuffHouse, 4817, 1992; Yo Yo, “Cleopatra,” *Black Pearl*, East-West, 92120, 1992; Boogie Down Productions, “Still #1 [Freestyle],” *Live Hardcore Worldwide*, Zomba, 1425, 1991; and The Beatnuts, “No Equal,” *Intoxicated Demons—The EP*, Relativity, 1114, 1993.

- "Fakin' the Funk" (Main Source)
- "Pop Goes the Weasel" (3rd Bass)
- "Crossover" (EPMD)
- "Mockingbird" (Yomo and Maulkie)
- "Check the Rhime" (A Tribe Called Quest)
- "What Is a Booty?" (Del tha Funkée Homosapien)⁷⁸
- E. Down with censorship
 - "Glory" (Yomo and Maulkie)
 - "Incident at 66.6 FM" (Public Enemy)
 - "Parental Discretion Is Advised" (NWA)⁷⁹
- F. Ghattocrazy
 - "Still in the Ghetto" (Black Sheep)
 - "Ill Street Blues" (Kool G. Rap)
 - "Fuck tha Police" (NWA)
 - "I'm the Man" (Gang Starr)
 - "I Got to Have It" (Ed O.G. and da Bulldogs)⁸⁰

78. Main Source, "Fakin' the Funk," *White Men Can't Rap*, Wild Pitch, EMI 99087, 1992; 3rd Bass, "Pop Goes the Weasel," *Derelicts of Dialect*, Def Jam, c 47869, 1991; EPMD, "Crossover" [maxi single], Ral, 4274172, 1992; Yomo and Maulkie, "Mockingbird," *Are U Experienced?* Ruthless Records, 91760, 1991; A Tribe Called Quest, "Check the Rhime," *The Low End Theory*, RCA/Jive, 1418, 1991; and Del tha Funkée Homosapien, "What Is a Booty?" *I Wish My Brother George Was Here*, Elektra, 61133, 1991.

79. Yomo and Maulkie, "Glory," *Are U Experienced?* Ruthless Records, 91760, 1991; Public Enemy, "Incident at 66.6 FM," *Fear of a Black Planet*, Def Jam, 45413, 1993; and NWA, "Parental Discretion Is Advised," *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 57102, 1989.

80. Black Sheep, "Still in the Ghetto"; Kool G. Rap, "Ill Street Blues," *Live and Let Die*, Cold Chillin', 5001, 1992; NWA, "Fuck tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 57102, 1989; Gang Starr, "I'm the Man," *Daily Operation*, Chrysalis, F1-21910, 1992; and Ed O. G. and da Bulldogs, "I Got to Have It," *Life of a Kid in the Ghetto* Mercury, 848 326, 1991.